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The Radical Politics of Possibility: Towards a Queer Existential Phenomenology Through Chantal Akerman's *Je tu il elle* (1975)

Ros Murray

*This article explores the temporalities at work in Chantal Akerman's *Je tu il elle* (1975) using the prism of a Beauvoirian existential and phenomenological approach to queer embodiment. It argues that an existentialist approach to the queer focuses on doing rather than being. Through a comparison of Beauvoir's existentialist ethics with Halberstam's analysis of queer failure, the essay explores how *Je tu il elle* stages the tension between two differing versions of failure: one emerging from the anti-social thesis, resting on negativity, refusal, and passivity; the other from an existentialist ethics, engaging in a more positive politics of phenomenological generosity.*

Shifting Pronouns

Chantal Akerman's films, particularly those from the 1970s, explore the densities of cinematic temporality and its relationship to subjectivity and non-normative bodily experience. Often cited as a pioneer of "slow cinema," Akerman's films sketch potential connections between slowness and queer forms of resistance, embodiment, and intersubjective encounters. This article focuses on her 1975 film *Je tu il elle* as an in-depth exploration of the intersubjective temporalities of sexual acts and their political potential, asking: what mode of futurity is at stake in *Je tu il elle*, and how might this be understood as queer? In approaching this question, I return to a perhaps unlikely philosopher, Simone de Beauvoir, to examine how a Beauvoirian existentialist and phenomenological methodology might offer a useful antidote to the anti-social while maintaining the political necessity of resistance to dominant, heteronormative temporal frameworks.

One particular moment in *Je tu il elle* displaces the complex temporal structures of the entire film, uncomfortably drawing us into a recognition of our own presence as spectators. The trucker with whom Julie, the "je" of the film, has hitched a lift reaches climax following a hand job from the off-screen Julie and says, as he lowers his head onto the steering wheel, "I am putting my head on the steering wheel." On one level, the viewer might share a sense of relief, coinciding with the trucker's climax, that this uncomfortable few minutes is over, the camera having been aligned just to one side of Julie, watching the trucker and listening to his directions as he tells her what to do. Yet this moment also implies a sense of profound unease by drawing attention to the artificiality of the situation and by blurring the lines between "I," "you," and "he." Is the viewer aligned with Julie, whose perspective we may share, but who is pointedly absent from the screen? With the trucker, who has just described in minute detail the physical sensations he undergoes, thus potentially evoking our bodily senses? Or with Akerman, the filmmaker and script-writer who directs the directions that the trucker seems to be dictating to Julie? The answer is more complex than any one or all of those potential spectatorial positions. By evoking our embodied position and simultaneously reminding us of the artificiality of the filmic encounter, Akerman deftly displaces the relationship between an unusual and highly



particular encounter and the general feeling of unease and relief that a viewer may experience, recognise, and process as embodied spectator.

Akerman's complex explorations of the relationship between the particular and the general have been explored from a feminist perspective (see for example Ivone Margulies's analysis of *Je tu il elle*, Margulies 1996, 100-127). Yet Akerman herself has often refused to label her films as "feminist" or "lesbian" and her films exist in an indeterminate realm between experimentalism and narrative film, documentary and fiction. Her manifest resistance to predefined genres, categories, or identities enables an ambiguous exploration of sexuality, gender, embodiment, and performance, and Akerman's films explore unusual situations that refuse to present us with something representative. A summary of the events in *Je tu il elle* might look something like this: Julie ("je") stays in her room for an extended period of time moving the furniture around, writing a long, repetitive letter, taking her clothes off and putting them back on again, pacing around and eating an entire packet of sugar by the spoonful. Once the sugar runs out and it begins to snow, she leaves the apartment, goes out to the motorway and hitches a lift with a trucker. She eats some food and drinks beers at truck-stops, watches the trucker shave, gets back in the truck, masturbates him, and then listens to him talking about his wife. Eventually she arrives at the flat of her ex-lover who lets her in but tells her she isn't allowed to stay, she then devours several Nutella sandwiches, has sex with her ex, and leaves. We are given no information about Julie that might explain her circumstances or psychology; we are simply exposed to her actions. In fact, the only character who provides us with any insight into psychological motivations is the trucker, who is so much of a cliché that he paradoxically fails to resemble anything recognisable. Yet it is clearly not on the level of narrative or psychology that this film operates, and it is impossible to ignore the extra-diegetic treatment of time, space, embodiment, gesture, and relation; it is perhaps more than anything a film about how bodies occupy space and how film itself becomes a form of complex choreography. As Margulies notes, Akerman was deeply influenced by New York experimentalism at this stage of her career, making films that explore temporality and spatial aesthetics in ways akin to the work of Michael Snow and Andy Warhol, as well as to her European avant-garde contemporaries (Margulies 1996, 11).

It is significant that the trucker's monologue takes place soon after what Akerman, in an interview with *Camera Obscura* from 1976, identifies as the only subjective shot in her early films (Bergstrom 1977, 120). In this interview Akerman explains that she shoots her films from her own perspective, never resorting to shot-reverse-shot or attempting to show a character's point-of-view. The moment when Julie surveys the back of the trucker's neck thus collapses the already threatened distinction between Akerman the filmmaker and the character she plays. Margulies responds to Akerman's assertion by calling the merging of character and director at this moment "Chantal" rather than the fictional "Julie" named in the credits. She writes:

The important moment when Chantal masturbates the trucker marks the complexity of her position between performer and director. This is the single instance in the film in which she is entirely outside the frame; it is also the one moment where the trucker looks directly at the camera, briefly confirming her double status as both character and director. (Margulies 1996, 119)

Within a discussion of the difficulties of negotiating the relationship between the particular and the general, Margulies argues that, rather than disrupting the subject, Akerman's



complex directorial and performative corporeal manoeuvres “stage the representation of subjectivity as inherently relational” (Margulies 1996, 121). This raises crucial questions regarding the status of the “I” in the film—particularly given that structurally the film moves from “I” (the first part of the first section), to “you” (the second part of the first section), to “he” (in the second section), and eventually to “she” (in the final section). Beginning by focusing on a body in self-imposed isolation, the film initially posits subjectivity from a distinctly individualist perspective, only opening up to the possibilities of relation once the film is well under way. In a catalogue produced on the occasion of a major retrospective of Akerman’s work at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, Akerman reflects briefly on this film, stating: “I no longer have anything in common with that anti-social, desperate character who nonetheless carries out gesture after gesture, with a kind of secret determination, a silent despair close to a scream” (Akerman 2004, 226). Akerman seems to be suggesting here that the character is profoundly anti-social and unable to relate to others. Yet the trajectory Julie undergoes, taking place on a road-trip inspired by Akerman’s own frequent hitchhiking journeys between Paris and Brussels in the early 1970s, seems to suggest otherwise, as do the pronouns in the title of the film, which do not exist in isolation but seem, after this initial section, to feed into one another.

Kaja Silverman’s article on *La Captive*—Akerman’s adaptation of Proust’s *La Prisonnière*, to which I will return later—also draws attention to the shifting pronouns (she too follows Margulies’ example by calling the character “Chantal” rather than “Julie”). She writes, “Chantal is the only character who appears in every scene, which might seem to entitle her to the ‘je’, but there are also two other claimants to this position, and there are times when she seems more closely aligned with one of the other pronouns” (Silverman 2007, 465). The two moments where this subjective shift happens, according to Silverman, are the scene with the trucker and the love-making scene between Julie and “elle,” her former lover. These two pivotal scenes have inspired a number of different interpretations, the most prevalent being the view of the film as an “experimentation with sexual identities” (Schmid 2010, 26).

The notion of identity as fluid may well bring us closer to a queer reading of the film where the subject’s unity and identity is troubled; more specifically, this essay aims to explore, from the perspective of a queer existentialism, the relationship between the particular and the general that arises at the very moment where identity indicators fail.

This reading is in part motivated by a certain sense of dissatisfaction with the ways in which the existing criticism interprets *Je tu il elle*. Approaches to the film seem to be limited by implied psychoanalytic undertones. Marion Schmid mentions the “parent-child trope,” drawing on Maureen Turim’s analysis of the protagonist’s actions as motivated by a “desire for nurturance” (quoted in Foster 2003, 15). Schmid writes: “Julie’s grabbing and unclothing of the lover’s breast indexes a desire for the mother” (2010, 30). This runs the risk of becoming a pathologizing move which seems at odds with her otherwise generous and insightful reading of the film as a “quintessential example” of a Deleuzian “cinema of bodies” (ibid., 27). Schmid also describes *Je tu il elle* as “an ambitious study of a young woman’s depression and experimentation with sexual identities” (ibid., 26). Yet one might equally contend that there are no identity markers other than “je” “tu” “il” and “elle,” which perform shifting functions, questioning the boundaries between self and other. The film is less about sexual identities than sexual acts, which is perhaps where its politics lie. Again, a view of the film as an exploration of adolescent crisis might cohere to the idea of sexual relations between women as forming part of the adolescent phase of female sexuality (informed by Freud and at times Beauvoir, albeit for different reasons).



To view the film from a queer and existentialist perspective opens up a series of different possibilities. On an immediate level, the film explores many of the (negative) affective states with which existentialism is often associated, notably nausea, anxiety, and boredom. It explores these states in phenomenological terms in its treatment and use of unconventional cinematic temporalities by inviting the viewer to experience them through affective identification with the body onscreen: through long shots where nothing much happens; through nauseous sequences where copious amounts of sugar or Nutella sandwiches are consumed; and through the long, drawn-out sex scenes. The film could be defined, in relation to the narrative, as a text about existential crisis: how to reconcile one's existence as a "subject" ("je") or as body in the world with the desires of others whose experience we can never fully inhabit, an experience that simultaneously seems to evoke the cinematic encounter between spectator and film. By focusing on the subject's relationship to objects around her as well as to other subjects, *Je tu il elle* seems to posit consciousness as intentional while also posing the problem of how to transcend one's bodily immanence by moving towards others. This would coincide with Akerman's own comments on the structure of the film, which she defines in terms of temporality: "The time of subjectivity," "the time of the other or report," and "the time of relation" (quoted in Margulies 1996, 110). In the first part, exploring the time of subjectivity, the subject is in crisis, refusing to leave the room and speaking only in the first-person singular. The first mention of "tu" seems only to emphasise her solitude and bad faith, as the voiceover reads the letter she writes to her lover: "I waited [...] for something to happen—for me to believe in God or for you to send me some gloves to go out in the cold." The second part of the film follows Julie's decision to leave, based on the arbitrary arrival of snow and the realisation that there are others in the world. This other, initially embodied in the trucker whom the subject ("je") desires and treats as object, in turn also desires, problematizing Julie's relation to herself and highlighting her fundamental ambiguity (both "je," subject, and "elle," object). The third time, the time of relation, comprises the second sex scene, where the possibility of reciprocal relation is opened up yet maintained as profoundly ambivalent.

Ambiguity, Failure, and Resistance

How might we view these themes of temporality, ambiguity, and a phenomenologically inflected approach towards embodiment as both queer *and* existentialist? Phenomenological approaches to queer and feminist embodiment have been well established through, for example, the work of Sara Ahmed (*Queer Phenomenology*), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (*Touching Feeling*), Elizabeth Grosz (*Volatile Bodies*), Laura Marks (*The Skin of the Film*), and Vivian Sobchack (*The Address of the Eye*). Ambiguity and temporality are recurrent topics in queer and feminist takes on embodiment (Elizabeth Freeman's *Time Binds* being perhaps the most obvious example). This discussion also develops from the genealogy of feminist and queer perspectives on Beauvoirian existentialism, beginning with Monique Wittig's "One is not born a woman," in which she argues, leaning heavily on Beauvoir and taking a materialist feminist approach, for the "destruction of heterosexuality as a social system" (1992, 20). More recently, Megan Burke writes that Beauvoir's existentialism provides a "valuable phenomenology of lesbian existence that is liberatory and novel for our time" (2012, 75). Also relevant here is Meryl Altman's analysis of what Beauvoir means to different generations of feminists, lesbians, and queers, how she inspires and simultaneously fails to provide a coherent account of a queer subjectivity that would be liveable, recognisable, and political (2007, 209). Kristin Rodier, Kyoo Lee, and Emily



Anne Parker have also explored potential expansions of Beauvoir's thought that connect it to intersectional feminism and the queer (Rodier 2014, Lee 2012, Parker 2009).

As many of these theorists point out, Beauvoir's take on lesbian sexuality as discussed in *The Second Sex* is ambivalent and often confused; yet all suggest that it is nonetheless still important, if not essential, to read Beauvoir. If Beauvoir, as Altman argues, means different things to different generations of feminists and queers, how might we situate her thought, and more importantly put her ethics to use, within contemporary debates in queer scholarship? Rather than focusing on *The Second Sex*, in which Beauvoir writes explicitly about lesbian sexuality, this essay considers the importance of an existentialist ethics, as explored in her 1947 work *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. By turning to what Beauvoir writes about failure and bringing her work into conversation with recent queer takes on failure, we can begin to think about how differing modes of queer negativity and positivity operate in *Je tu il elle*.

Beauvoir's approach to existentialism can be defined, as Sonia Kruks argues, as an "existential phenomenology," concerned with social and political phenomena and lived experience (Kruks 2001, 7; see also O'Brien 2001). Kruks writes that Beauvoir's philosophy deals with the problem of how to theorise a subject that has agency and choice but is not the classical subject of enlightenment freedom and reason (2001, 13). *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is a response to accusations that there could be no ethics based on existentialist methodology. Beauvoir founds the ethics of existentialism on the notion of ambiguity: the individual must determine how to come to terms with the fact that s/he is both subject and object, freedom and facticity. From the moment we come to face our own freedom, we must assume but not attempt to reconcile the contradictions it brings. Beauvoir's writing on failure comes at a pivotal moment in her argument, in a section on "the positive aspect of ambiguity," exploring the contradictions and difficulties of ethical existence. Her question in this section is how ambiguity can be lived and how it can inspire positive political change.

According to Beauvoir, failure is an absolutely necessary facet of ethical existence: "Without failure, no ethics" (1948, 10). In fact, for Beauvoir the failure/success dichotomy is another facet of the ambiguity of the human condition: "So it is with any activity; failure and success are two aspects of reality which at the start are not distinguishable" (ibid., 129). She uses the example of painting to make the point that art is in continual process, never able to achieve totality in a single instance, so that painting becomes the "movement toward its own reality" (ibid.). She writes: "human transcendence must cope with the same problem: it has to found itself, though it is prohibited from ever fulfilling itself" (ibid., 130). By continually failing to reach a conclusion, our actions may seem futile; on the contrary, Beauvoir argues, "freedom is achieved absolutely in the very fact of aiming at itself" (ibid., 131). In other words, we should understand each of our actions as finite or absolute while also acknowledging that they reflect the infinite; freedom is infinite yet it must be accomplished in definite acts. The relationship between means and ends is troubled and we must assume this contradiction in order to make positive change by reflecting on the best action to take in each possible situation.

This emphasis on existence as continual process in some respects chimes with a queer approach to subjectivity as a process, as a continual doing or becoming. An insistence on troubling the relationship between means and end is central to an understanding of non-normative bodily experience and how it inflects or is reflected in disruptive cinematic temporalities, bringing us to the question of how queerer "failures" relate to the existential. If Beauvoir's view of failure here comes from a markedly positive approach, a rather different version of failure emerges in Judith Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure*, one which nonetheless is useful in bringing out the difficulties and complexities of Beauvoir's approach



and in thinking of how in turn failure functions in *Je tu il elle*. Halberstam's project in arguing for a queer and feminist politics of failure aims to dismantle and challenge the logic of success that defines reproductive capitalism. She argues that "failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well" and that "from the perspective of feminism, failure has often been a better bet than success" (Halberstam 2011, 3, 4). Halberstam refers to "shadow feminisms," such as the works of Monique Wittig and Valerie Solanas, which "take the form not of becoming, being and doing but of shady, murky modes of undoing, unbecoming, and violating" (ibid., 4). Whereas for Halbertsam, failure is an "undoing," for Beauvoir it is always a doing. Halberstam advocates a feminist politics that issues from "a refusal to be or become woman as she has been defined and imagined within Western philosophy [...] a feminism grounded in negation, refusal, passivity, absence, and silence" (ibid., 124). This anti-social form of masochistic passivity entails "subjects who unravel, refuse to cohere," whose very existence challenges the terms on which freedom is offered (ibid., 145). Halberstam's issue is, of course, that some people are more free than others, and by incorporating postcolonial critiques of a feminism that seeks to save others for its own benefit, she discerns the potential problems of a freedom that wills the freedom of others. By refusing to speak for others, and even for oneself, however, this queer art of failure states itself squarely as a politics of refusal, negation, and critique.

Beauvoir also writes that sometimes there is no solution other than refusal and that negation is at times the only necessary action to take. She gives the example of the Resistance, writing that it "did not aspire to a positive effectiveness; it was a negation, a revolt," yet she also writes that "in this negative movement freedom was positively and absolutely confirmed" (1948, 131). While recognising the potential value of failure, negativity, and refusal, Beauvoir again insists on positive action. She argues that it is easy to remain within a stance of refusal, critique, and negation, but that genuine freedom lies in the recognition and acceptance of failure: "it is the abortive movement of man toward being which is his very existence, it is through the failure which he has assumed that he asserts himself as a freedom" (ibid., 137). This ethics is, for Beauvoir, social rather than anti-social. To remain indefinitely within the negative, at least in Beauvoirian terms, would be nihilistic, which is why she can never be described (on Halberstam's terms) as a shadow feminist.

Halberstam's failure remains within a radical negativity, unlike Beauvoir's which is about the opening up of possibilities, about, conversely, succeeding through failure. While both argue that we should embrace failure as part of our fundamental condition, in Halberstam's version it seems that queerness is always already doomed to failure, whereas Beauvoir suggests that failure entails and arises from our choices and positive actions. Why are these discussions around failure, ambiguity, and refusal relevant to *Je tu il elle*? Returning to the film through the prism of Beauvoir and queer failure, we see that it operates not only an intricate staging of the ambiguity of existence, but also that it enacts the tensions between these two different versions of failure—skirting the boundaries between the contrasting realms of anti-social negativity, full of aborted attempts to relate to the other, and exultant freedom and positivity where sexual acts are carried out in the spirit of liberation and generosity.

The anti-social thesis certainly allows us to interpret *Je tu il elle* as a refusal of heteronormative temporalities. Julie's movements might be seen as a series of refusals of basic human duties and functions and the temporalities implied in these (non)activities, realised in a refusal to eat, a refusal to work, a refusal of relation, a refusal to leave her room, and, eventually, a refusal to stay with her lover. A phenomenological perspective, however, allows for a far more productive viewing, particularly given that the film revels in haptic imagery, rustling sheets and



nauseous gobbling. Rather than taking the easy option and focusing on the negative, we might consider what a Beauvoirian-inflected queer positivity looks like.

In Beauvoirian existentialist terms, *Je tu il elle* recalls the difficulties posed by the ambiguity of existence arising from the issue that I am both subject for myself and object for others. *Je tu il elle* is concerned with assuming the ambivalence of the self and of any form of relation. This ambivalence becomes ethical in Beauvoirian terms if we view the end of the film not as a refusal but as an opening out, or a celebratory movement, whereby the “je” has been realised in its relation to the other (“elle”). The opening words of the film, “et je suis partie” (“and I set off”) announces not only the beginning of the film and the protagonist’s journey, but also a simple yet suspended action which is completed at the end through the other, who wakes to find her lover gone. The *chanson de jeu* that resonates alongside the closing credits—“Join the dance / see how we dance / jump, dance / kiss who you like”—points towards the opening up of possibilities, echoing the beautiful frankness of the choreographed yet intensely emotional love-making sequence that precedes it. If we read this moment as a queer refusal of narrative closure and of sexual identities, it is also a celebration of the “je” of the film’s capacity to transcend fixity and to create herself through her acts in relation to others, without seeking justification through the other’s perspective. The film explores sexuality as a doing, not a being, in continual process, which is relevant to accounts of existential freedom and transcendence such as Beauvoir’s (and Jean-Paul Sartre) as well as to a phenomenological focus on embodied experience (where Beauvoir draws on Maurice Merleau-Ponty).

Jenny Chamarette argues that Akerman’s work might be described as “resistant” through the ways in which their “formal and aesthetic structures shift and self-shape,” in turn “self-reflexively reaching outwards towards an acknowledgement of, and elision of, the signifying hierarchies of the intersubjective relationships between the filmic, pro-filmic and spectatorial” (2012, 151). “Resistance,” taken from a phenomenological perspective, is given a distinctly positive twist. This act of transcending bodily immanence refers as much to the body of film and the ways it engages with the spectator’s bodily responses as it does to the body of the protagonist, a movement which we may well read as queer.

The queer politics of *Je tu il elle* reside equally in its formal innovations as in its frank portrayal of sexual acts. Not only is there a queering of cinematic convention in the two scenes due to their excessive length, but also in terms of the camera angles and framing. For while in the first scene with the trucker we may shift between Akerman the filmmaker, Julie the character, and “il” the character, the masturbation scene occurs within a single shot that almost, but not quite, coincides with Julie’s perspective, operating a subtle displacement of what initially appears to be a point-of-view shot. The second sex scene is filmed in medium-long shots in three very long takes; here we are reminded of our uncomfortable position as viewer by being exposed head-on to the two intertwined bodies wrestling within the frame, shot from three different angles, but never aligned with a character’s (or the “Chantal,” as director/performer that Margulies posits) perspective. While the scene with the trucker is accompanied by the sound of the engine running, here the sound is an amplified rustling of sheets. In the scene with the trucker the viewer only has access to what is happening through the trucker’s monologue, as the trucker is fully clothed and the action occurs off camera. There is a very different focus on the characters’ embodiment in the second sex scene through the inclusion of both naked bodies entirely within the frame. The choreography of their movements, the amplified soundtrack, and the viewer’s sense of her/his own embodiment situates this scene as phenomenologically inflected, and again, to borrow Chamarette’s term, “resistant” in terms



of the “modalities of subjectivity that emerge” (Chamarette 2012, 151)—the modalities here being explicitly queer as well as operating a queering of convention.

Queer Choreography

Choreography and dance occupy a central position in Akerman's work. Indeed, *Je tu il elle* is carefully choreographed right from the start, as Akerman's body moves in and out of shot, crawling across the floor, moving around in relation to the objects surrounding her such as the mattress, the sheets of paper and the bag of sugar. The position of objects and the body in the frame as well as the camera movements seem to shift between still life, or photography, and slow, minimal dance. The body is framed amongst furniture, blank or painted walls, corridors, and between door and window frames, as so often in Akerman's films. The use of lighting in *Je tu il elle* is reduced to a minimum, with the gradual closing of the aperture in order to create the sense of night falling, marking the passing of time—echoing, but slightly out of time, the voiceover which arbitrarily counts the days. The slow camera movements also form a part of this strangely sensuous choreography, performing slow pans that follow the body as it shuffles in and out of shot. The voiceover speaks of being attentive, with heightened senses, and the lack of effects such as artificial lighting or music creates a feeling of overall sparseness, focusing on ambient noise and the bare body enacting its creative processes, writing, moving, eating sugar, or spilling it on the floor.

The encounter between Julie and her ex-lover thus becomes an explicit culmination of a quietly queer choreography that runs throughout the whole film. Kaja Silverman writes of this final scene: “each exercises power, and then has it wrested away from her by the other. The ‘I’ and the ‘you’ swift positions at a dizzying rate, both literally and metaphorically, and the surprising frank way in which Akerman films their lovemaking marks both of them as ‘she’” (2007, 451). This form of resistance is more convincingly aligned with a radical positivity rather than negativity. The problem with negativity as it emerges in the anti-social thesis in queer theory might be that it so often falls within a psychoanalytic framework (see, for example, Lee Edelman's *No Future* and Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism*). Rather than threatening us with psychic inundation, as Berlant and Edelman argue in their recent work *Sex, or the Unbearable* (2014, xii), a focus on sex might more productively suggest a phenomenological approach that takes us beyond discourse and beyond the (Lacanian) psychoanalytic subject. Again, we might turn to Beauvoir for such an approach, looking this time at what she writes at the end of the polemical section on lesbianism in *The Second Sex*, where she concludes that it can be “the source of fruitful experiences, depending on whether it is lived in bad faith, laziness and inauthenticity, or in lucidity, generosity and freedom” (2009, 448). A focus on the latter, in both phenomenological and existential terms, might transform how our interpretation of the final scene of *Je tu il elle*.

In critical accounts of *Je tu il elle*, the tendency to fall back, however tentatively, on psychoanalysis (the mother-daughter relation), as I have argued, reveals a stifling set of limitations. If, as in Turim's accounts, the breast becomes a symbol of motherhood, collapsing the female anatomy back into its reproductive function and ignoring its potentiality as a site of pleasure, Silverman offers an alternative approach. Her reading of Akerman's *La Captive* relates the two bodies pressing up against each other back to Proust and the moment when Cottard and Marcel watch Andrée and Albertine dancing together. In this passage Cottard reveals to Marcel: “Women derive most of their excitement through their breasts” (Proust 2003,



264). The pressing of bodies against each other, as in *La prisonnière* and *La captive*, becomes a destabilizing of the “je,” the “tu,” and the “elle.” Rather than confronting their limits, the bodies in *Je tu il elle*’s celebratory final scene are discovering new ways of being in the world, which then enable the protagonist to do what she set out to do at the beginning—that is, to leave, or to go out into the world, with the film ending with “elle” waking up to find “je” gone.

It is through bodily sexual acts rather than subjective identities that the film operates its queer resistance. Beauvoir’s emphasis on action makes her existentialist vision so relevant for a reading of Akerman’s film; less relevant for a queer reading is perhaps that existentialist ethics require a subject, which may be the very subject that post-structuralist approaches to the queer so carefully dismantle. Yet what defines the subject according to Beauvoir is her capacity to act. The Beauvoirian subject is not the same as the subject of psychoanalysis or as the subject of discourse, but rather it is a subject continually creating herself through her actions, capable of shifting to “you,” to “he,” or to “she” (always in relation to the “I” that she never ceases to be) through affective relations and without collapsing into a formless mass. This subject assumes her ambiguity as both subject and object and her failure not as radical negativity but as radical potentiality. In *In a Queer Time and Place*, Halberstam writes about queerness as the “potential to open up new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space” (2005, 1). Akerman’s body of work explores these alternative relations to time and space in great detail, and, through attention to the personal and the particular, she offers us a space from which politics might begin. The next stage is getting from the singular “I, you, he, she” to the plural “we” while also incorporating an intersectional approach that might well find the highly personal queerness of *Je tu il elle* lacking. If existentialist methodology utilises “a perfectly deliberate and intentional use of the *concrete* as a way of approaching the abstract, the *particular* as a way of approaching the general” (Warnock 1970, 133), this is echoed in Akerman’s approach to her own work: “I haven’t tried to find a compromise between myself and others. I have thought that the more particular I am the more I address in general” (quoted in Margulies 1996, 1). This peculiarly particular generality is not a politics of refusal, but rather of phenomenological generosity, explored through a celebratory opening out onto the world and its queer potential.







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